

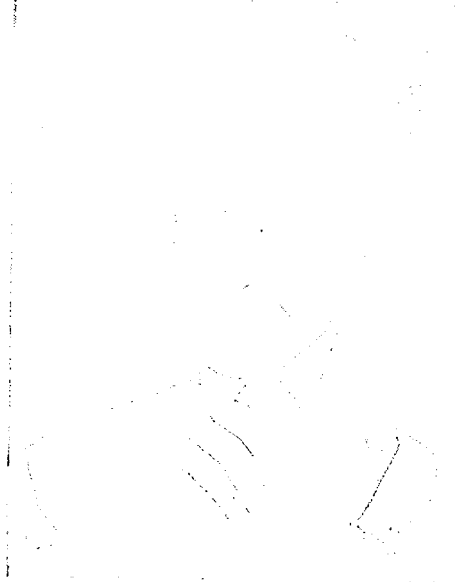
THE EXPRESS

The Perils of JJSS

In the plush Paris offices of the French news magazine L'Express last week, there was a familiar atmosphere of crisis. Angry senior editors stalked through the corridors, brandishing manifestoes and threatening to resign; agitated staffers huddled together in alcoves, executives met to plan new maneuvers. And there was no doubt about the cause of the uproar: the second such upheaval in five months at L'Express. Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, the mercurial journalist-turned-politician, was in the midst of another power play designed to regain editorial control over the flourishing and influential magazine he founded eighteen years ago.

JJSS, as he likes to call himself, turned his original liberal tabloid into a smashingly successful U.S.-style news magazine in 1964, then left it to embark upon a stormy political career early last year. Running as anti-Gaullist candidate for a parliamentary seat in Nancy, the 47-year-old Jean-Jacques first won a stunning victory. But nine months later, he decided to run as well against Premier Jacques Chaban-Delmas in Bordeaux and suffered a defeat so humiliating that many French political observers believe it effectively killed any idea JJSS held of attaining national political office. It was not long after the Bordeaux disaster that Jean-Jacques made his first move to reassert his dominance at L'Express. In January of this year, to the open consternation of many staffers, JJSS ousted his younger brother Jean-Louis from his position as chief executive of the Servan-Schreiber family's publishing empire, Le Groupe Express (Newsweek, Jan. 11). At the same time, JJSS also wangled himself a toe hold on the magazine by winning back a weekly political column he had abandoned when he entered politics.

Friend: In reasserting much of his former power at L'Express, however, JJSS has alienated many of its top editors and executives, most of whom he himself had hired in the past. At the magazine's top echelons, there are now many who fear that Jean-Jacques's return will compromise L'Express's editorial independence by turning it into a platform for his own still smoldering political ambitions. Foremost among JJSS's antagonists is Olivier Chevrillon, an erstwhile friend and colleague, who is currently the magazine's president. Two months ago, Chevrillon complained that Jean-Jacques had exceeded the limits of a \$580,000 annual fund the magazine had given him for his personal and professional use—a charge that JJSS labels as “phony.” From Nancy, which remains his home base, word quickly leaked out that Jean-Jacques was out to “have the head” of Chevrillon. “I adore trench warfare,” JJSS was quoted as saying,



MICHAEL D. SUTHERLAND/REUTERS

Jean-Jacques: A problem of control

Last week, the battlelines hardened considerably with the publication of a manifesto signed by twelve Express senior editors that flatly charged JJSS with trying to take over the magazine. “When JJSS undertook a political career,” the manifesto stated, “he recognized the incompatibility between journalistic responsibility and political responsibility.” Jean-Jacques's own eloquent words on the subject were then embarrassingly resurrected. And the senior editors concluded with a blunt affirmation that they would “consider any measure, direct or indirect, to bring back to the direction of L'Express a man who is now a politician as a de facto modification of the magazine's nature [and we] could not accept this transformation.” Speaking for his eleven other colleagues as well, managing editor Claude Habert put the issue very simply: “We don't want to wage politics for a party or a man.”

For the man in question, there is also a stark simplicity to the battle for L'Express. “The problem is control,” JJSS told Newsweek's Steve Saler soon after the manifesto of the editors was published. “The editors thought the magazine was theirs. I can't compromise with that. I'm the protector of the magazine.” He also ruled out any possibility of compromise with Chevrillon. “It's just aggression,” Jean Jacques said, “an attempt to seize the magazine.”

Win: At this point, there is little doubt that JJSS can win the current round and succeed in ousting Chevrillon. The actual firing will probably occur later this month at a stockholders' meeting; Jean-Jacques and two of his sisters control more than 60 per cent of the company's shares, and he should have little difficulty in working his will. But in winning the battle, it could turn out that JJSS will lose the war. For there is a real danger

that if Jean Jacques presses his demands for personal editorial control of the magazine too hard, many of L'Express's senior staff will resign immediately. And any mass departure of the magazine's top editors—and further washing of dirty laundry in public—would inevitably cut heavily into both L'Express's quality and its prestige.

JJSS himself tends to shrug off the threat of a large-scale exodus of the magazine's editors. “I'm not for firing them,” he declares, but should they walk out he believes he could find “new blood” elsewhere. Other Express officials are hardly as sanguine. “Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber,” sums up one senior executive, “is going to have to be reasonable or face the prospect of his own enterprise being destroyed.”